# EARLY HISTORICAL REFERENCES TO THE BIG THICKET, TEXAS Michael H. MacRoberts and Barbara R. MacRoberts

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### **ABSTRACT**

We report on four pre-1860 references to the Big Thicket. All place the Big Thicket on or near the San Jacinto River west or at the western edge of where modern accounts place it. Two describe it as a thicket, and two as open woods.

#### RESUMEN

Citamos cuatro referencias anteriores a 1860 del Big Thicket. Todas colocan el Big Thicket en o cerca de San Jacinto River al oeste o en la orilla oeste de donde lo colocan los modernos. Dos lo describen como un matorral, y otros dos como bosques abiertos.

There is much disagreement on what should be called the Big Thicket (Cozine 2004; Diggs et al. 2006). The broadest conception has it encompassing about 3.5 million hectares in an area extending from the Brazos to the Sabine rivers and from Nacogdoches to Beaumont. The narrowest conception is the "Hunters Thicket" encompassing only 130,000 hectares mostly in Hardin County. Today, the most generally accepted view corresponds more or less to a compromise between the Biological Survey definition of Parks and Cory (1938) and the Ecological Area definition of McLeod (1971). In this view it encompasses more or less Jasper, Newton, Tyler, Hardin, Polk, San Jacinto, Montgomery, and northern Liberty counties: about 1.8 million hectares (see Diggs et al. [2006] for a detailed discussion of literature and maps of the various locations of the Big Thicket).

Del Weniger, the eminent ecological historian of Texas, argued that the phrase "Big Thicket" was not old but dated from only the mid-nineteenth century and that today's location of the Big Thicket is not where it originally was (Weniger 1984). The two earliest (pre-1860) accounts he was able to find which used that phrase were by Don E.E. Braman and J. De Cordoba, from 1857 and 1858, respectively. These accounts place the Big Thicket on the San Jacinto River or between the two forks of the San Jacinto River in what are now San Jacinto, Montgomery, and possibly Walker counties, to the west or at the western edge of where modern scholars locate it (county boundaries have changed considerably since the 1850s) (Fig. 1). These two sources do not describe the Big Thicket as an impenetrable forest but as a highly desirable region of mostly large, dense timber with fertile and productive soil that was already extensively settled by the late 1850s.

Diggs et al. (2006) recently described a third pre-1860s account of the Big Thicket. This is in *A Stray Yankee in Texas*, published in 1853 by Philip Paxton (Paxton 1853). As Diggs et al. (2006) only briefly mention this reference, additional comment seems warranted. Philip Paxton (a pseudonym for Samuel Adams Hammett, 1816-1865) was born in Connecticut and moved to Texas in 1835 where he remained until 1848 working in and around Montgomery and Houston. Upon his return east, he wrote serious and humorous magazine articles about Texas. In 1853 he published these as *A Stray Yankee in Texas* (Hoole 2007). Paxton's account of the Big Thicket is interesting for two main reasons. First, he places the Big Thicket on the San Jacinto River, which, as in the accounts of Braman and De Cordoba, is west of or on the western edge of where current descriptions locate it. Second, unlike Braman and De Cordoba, Paxton describes the Big Thicket as a thicket. According to him, the Big Thicket, while having "the finest timber in the world" is "a thicket so dense that even in that country of tangled forest, it is known—par excellence—as the big thicket...." He continues: "This spot had been aptly named the 'big thicket.' Immense bamboo briers, like vegetable *Pythons*,

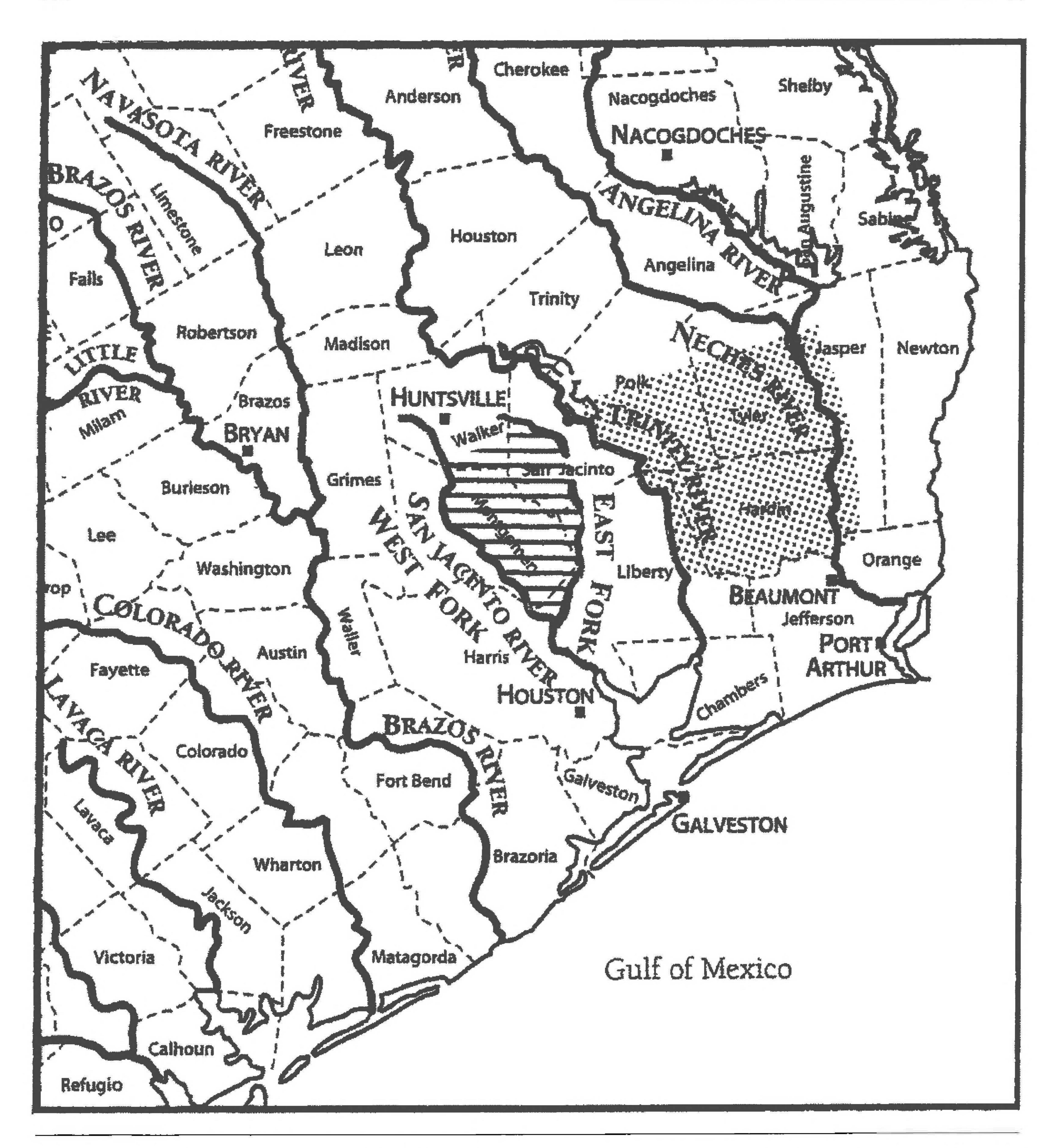


Fig. 1. Southeast Texas showing pre-1860 location of the Big Thicket (hatched area) and present day location of the Big Thicket National Preserve (speckled area) (Figure modified from Diggs et al. 2006, Figure 8).

twined and intertwined, crossed and recrossed, from tree to tree, and shrub to shrub, forming a natural trellis-work for the thousand and one wild and beautiful vines that abound there." Further, he writes: "The first part of our journey was effected on horseback; but after proceeding some half a mile into the 'timber,' this mode of progression was suddenly brought to a period by the dense undergrowth, and we were reduced to a very natural and primitive style of locomotion." Finally, he adds: "We now had to contend for every step we gained; knife and hatchet were in constant requisition, and for one hour we pressed on in Indian file as fast as we could." Paxton describes or refers to such plant habitats as "cypress-brakes," "palmetto swamps," "cane-brakes," "sloughs," and "prairies." He mentions individual plants: "magnolia grandiflora," "bamboo,"

"passion vine," "cypress vine," "morning-glory," "trumpet-creeper," "cypress," "hanging-moss" (Spanish moss), and "cane," and animals: "log-cock" (Pileated woodpecker), "paroquet" (Carolina parakeet), "mocking-bird," "moccasin snake," "alligator," "bear," and "fish."

With the aid of Parker's bibliography (1977), we located another early account. This occurs in an article "The Big Thicket Ruins" in *The Texas Republic*, 3 May 1856. The relevant passage reads: "A man by the name of *Smith*, reported to the Washington American about the *First of April*, that he had recently discovered in the Big Thicket on the San Jacinto some twenty-five miles from Montgomery, an ancient ruin..." (italics in original). The article goes on to describe these ruins as being in "a dense thicket almost impenetrable."

Thus, all four of the earliest known references to the Big Thicket place it on the San Jacinto River or between the forks of the San Jacinto River on the western edge of the generally accepted conception of the Big Thicket (Diggs et al. 2006), or as Weniger (1984) stated: "this places the Big Thicket in the area of present Montgomery and San Jacinto counties, roughly between Conroe, Cleveland, Coldspring, and Huntsville," which is basically what is today the Sam Houston National Forest. To our knowledge, there are no early accounts that place the Big Thicket in Hardin, Tyler, Jasper, Newton, Liberty, or Polk counties or on the Sabine, Neches, or Trinity rivers where present-day scholars locate it and where the Big Thicket National Preserve is located. But, both Paxton's and Smith's accounts contradict Weniger's finding that the Big Thicket was originally described as an open and hospitable land. Both accounts clearly describe the Big Thicket as virtually impassable.

Why and when the phrase "Big Thicket" came to be applied to the more eastern region remains unknown. If anyone knows of other pre-1860 references to the Big Thicket or has information on the evolution of the concept of the "Big Thicket," we would appreciate hearing from them.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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